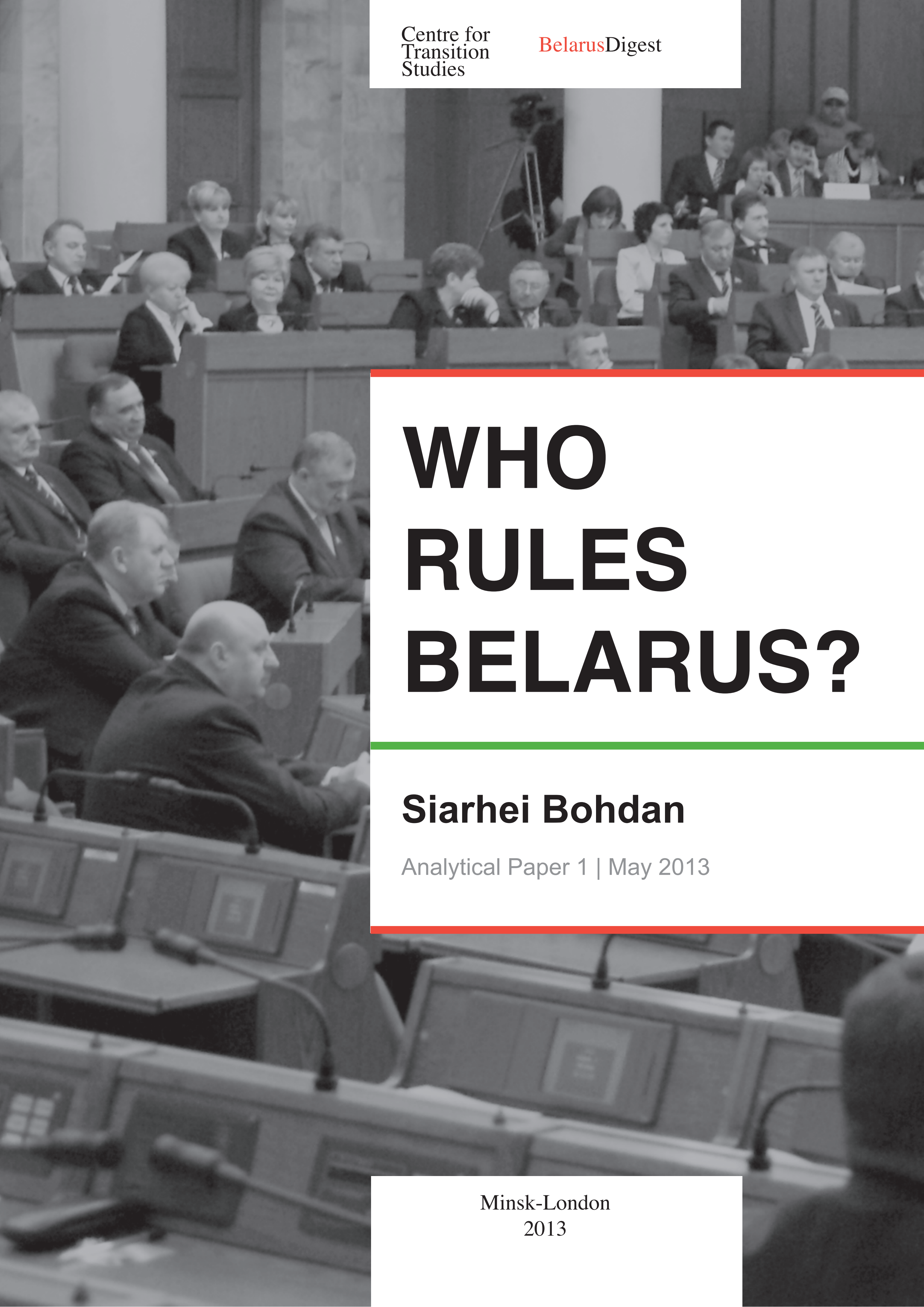


Centre for Transition Studies
BelarusDigest

WHO RULES BELARUS?

Siarhei Bohdan

Analytical Paper 1 | May 2013

Minsk-London
2013

Centre for
Transition
Studies

Minsk
Box 117, 36 Adzintsova vul.
Minsk 220136
Belarus
minsk@transition-centre.org

London
4, 52 Penn Road
London N7 9RE
United Kingdom
london@transition-centre.org

BelarusDigest

Contents

Executive Summary

- The paper deals with the Belarusian political and economic establishment, its background, potential and prospects for change. The annex contains analyses of key figures in the Belarusian regime.

- While the government's authority is concentrated in President Lukashenka, he needs a sophisticated state structures to run the country and has retained his retinue for years. While Lukashenka as a politician has been analysed quite extensively, his close comrades have scarcely been studied.

- Belarusian ruling elites emerged as a result of an effective power-sharing deal between Soviet-era bureaucrats and new supporters of the Belarusian president who have risen from the depths of the provinces to the very top due to their talent and unscrupulous ambitions.

- This liaison has proven successful both in terms of its cohesion and performance. There has been just one failed mutiny, occurring in the late 1990s amongst the nomenclature, while the consolidated regime-linked elites have run Belarus rather successfully in terms of its governance and economy.

- Politically, Belarusian ruling elites of whatever origin have opted for an original path of development which has contradicted Western ideas about democracy and human rights. However, the opportunistic opposition to the West is not based on any profound ideology.

- The ruling establishment in Belarus can act as responsible and reasonable partner for the West if offered a pragmatic deal.

- While pragmatically working with ruling elites for the sake of preserving Belarusian independence and an eventual smooth transformation, the West should simultaneously demonstrate to them and the populace realistic prospects of cooperation with Europe.

Introduction

When in November 2011 British historian Norman Davies presented his new book *Vanished Kingdoms*, he cited Belarus as an example of a nation without a mature elite. According to him, a fragile Belarusian state emerged after World War I, but Stalin purged nearly the entirety of its national elite in the late 1930s. In his opinion, this is the main reason why today Belarusians cannot govern themselves other than by a "teapot dictator" such as Lukashenka.

Lukashenka's rule has resulted in the emergence of some new elites, yet they are of a very remarkable and regime-linked nature. There has been no mass violence, yet authoritarian rule in Belarus has levelled the playing field of Belarusian politics. Currently it looks more like a desert, with only primitive forms of political life outside of the presidential palace. Belarusian politics is almost entirely bound up in its ruling elites.

Authoritarian rule in Belarus has levelled the playing field of Belarusian politics. Currently it looks more like a desert, with only primitive forms of political life outside of the presidential palace.

These elites emerged as a result of an effective deal concluded in the mid-1990s. The contracting parties were professionals who used to run the BSSR during the Soviet Union, and newcomers who had no status in Soviet times and had rapidly risen after 1991 due to their personal abilities. Neither group could rule the country on its own. The Soviet-era nomenclature had expertise, but no vision of Belarus as an independent nation and no will to fight for power. The maverick team of President Lukashenka – both political figures and the regime-linked businessmen – had many visions and an appetite for politics, but no expertise and no connections either inside the country or abroad.

This liaison had proven successful both in terms of its cohesion and performance. Only once, in the late 1990s, a segment of Lukashenka's team launched a large-scale attempt to challenge his rule. The key members of his team in 1995-1996 deserted to the Parliament which opposed Lukashenka's initiative to strengthen presidential powers. After a confrontation and referendum on radical amendments to the Constitution in November 1996, Lukashenka won. He adjusted the state system according to his wishes and disbanded the Supreme Soviet.

The members of the disbanded Parliament were mostly yesterday's directors and officials, not dissidents. They hoped to use their own connections and status within the population, state bureaucracy and economic elites to oust Lukashenka. A former member of Lukashenka's team, Viktar Hanchar, tried to keep the officially disbanded Supreme Soviet afloat as a centre of resistance, and even made a futile attempt to hold a new presidential election in 1999.

Yet this underground Supreme Soviet failed to attract the nomenclature and suffered defeat in a political confrontation on the streets. In autumn 1999, Hanchar disappeared in what is widely believed to have been an act of political kidnapping. Since the early 2000s, the opposition has been reduced to more of a dissident movement than a

political alternative and has not been able to provide the nomenclature with another option “without Lukashenka”.
Another factor has contributed considerably to this marginalisation of the opposition and its transformation into a quasi-dissident movement. The performance of Lukashenka’s united old-new ruling elite in Belarus has been rather positive in governance and economic terms: Belarus has thus far been a functioning state, faring quite well in the post-Soviet context.

Of course, their performance has been far from excellent. Lukashenka’s monopoly on politics has not only exhausted and diminished the Belarusian opposition. It has also transformed the government itself into an amorphous mass of managers unable to work on their own. There seem to be only a handful of people amongst the regime’s servants who can become public politicians. The current Belarusian leader has always been careful to promote not individual politicians, but ‘able functionaries’ (‘khozyaystvenniki’) within his system.

Even pro-presidential organisations that have been established at one time or another, apparently in an attempt to provide a popular basis for the regime and possibly serve as a source of new elites – like the Belarusian Republican Youth Union (BRSM) or the public association Belaya Rus – have not been able to persuade Lukashenka to enact change and have remained merely a handful of shabby institutions with colourless leaders.

Opportunism of the Belarusian Regime

Politically, Belarusian ruling elites, whatever their origin might be, opted for an original path of development which very quickly contradicted the Western and the EU ideas about democracy and human rights. However, this contradiction is not based on any profound ideological foundations anti-Western, i.e., nothing like Third-World ideologies or Marxism. Their opportunistic opposition to the West is of pragmatic nature, and nobody among the regime's leading figures holds anything resembling with an ideology.

Likewise, their opposition to economic reforms has nothing to do with any socialist views. They simply fear the possible political consequences of these reforms. No wonder the World Bank and IMF, even at the beginning of Lukashenka's reign, were quite optimistic about Belarusian prospects.

They simply fear the possible political consequences of these reforms.

The Belarusian regime is generally very opportunistic. This has nothing to do with totalitarianism or rank-and-file discipline to some fixed ideology. They are bureaucrats. Even radical opponents of the regime admit this. Speaking to European Radio for Belarus in 2010, then presidential candidate Andrei Sannikau said: "I would not call the [current cabinet members] 'ministers', as they are in one or another way involved in the establishment and support of a dictatorship. I know, however, that below the ministerial level work very qualified and professional people".

Variations among the ministers themselves show that they are far from a uniform group of individuals without their own agendas. For instance, the former Minister of Culture Pavel Latushka speaks Belarusian in public – already a deviation from a standard bureaucrat - and is known for his professionalism. After taking office he initiated a policy of supporting Belarusian culture, neglected since 1994 by the regime. One of his initiatives was a large state-funded program titled Belarusian Castles.

Prominent ideologue of the regime Leu Kryshtapovich has criticised the program as "alien" to Belarusian history. In his opinion, the Belarusian nobility had nothing to do with the country's national history. Aliaksandar Kavalenya, director of the History Institute of the National Academy of Sciences, responded harshly, and essentially supported the version of national history which generally corresponds to the views held by the oppositional segment of Belarusian society. Moreover, minister Latushka received vocal support from Pavel Yakubovich, another veteran of the regime and the editor-in-chief of Belarus Segodnya, the most vital and important media outlet of the regime.

Elites Split

There are very clear cleavages within the Belarusian establishment. A closer look at who actually runs the security services and other governmental agencies in Belarus reveals several interesting facts and trends. Upon closer inspection, it becomes apparent that those who were born outside of Belarus and educated in Russia heavily dominate the leadership of the police, the military and the KGB, while most 'technocrats' were born and educated within Belarus. Another notable fact is that most Belarusian officials are advanced in years and their age can serve as an important indicator in predicting their views. Younger ministers tend to be more liberal and less hawkish than their older colleagues.

Nearly all of the top officials of the Belarusian security services were born outside of Belarus and came to the country after completing their studies in Moscow. In this respect Belarus is a rather unique country.

It is ethnically homogenous, with Belarusians constituting over 85 per cent of the population. An even larger majority of the current population was born in Belarus. This majority, however, is clearly underrepresented amongst the leadership of the nation's own security services.

Yury Zhadobin, the current Minister of Defense and a former KGB chief, was born in Ukraine. In 2004, he obtained his most recent degree from the Academy of the General Staff of the Russian Federation. According to his official biography he has never studied in Belarus. The current KGB chief Vadim Zaitsev was also born in Ukraine. He has three degrees from various Russian military institutions and none from Belarus.

Anatol Kulyashou, the current Minister of the Interior, who is also in charge of the police, was born in Azerbaijan. Although he has lived most of his life in Belarus, his most recent degree is also from a Moscow-based institution - the Russian Academy of the Interior. The head of the Presidential Security Service, Andrei Vtiurin, was born and educated in Russia and has never studied elsewhere.

Many in the opposition call those who lead the security services in Belarus Lukashenka's mercenaries. It is not surprising: all of the security agency officials mentioned here are on the EU travel ban list due to their active involvement in human rights violations and political repression.

According to a popular theory, the Russian/Belarusian security services manipulated Lukashenka and provoked the post-election crackdown on 19 December 2010. Many think that Moscow was the main beneficiary of last year's crackdown and the subsequent imprisonment of hundreds, including nearly all of the opposition presidential candidates. As a result of the crackdown Belarus has become more internationally isolated and dependent upon Russia.



But the influence of the Moscow loyalists may be diminishing. Although Lukashenka granted additional powers to the KGB recently, he also established a new security agency: the Investigations Committee, which is supposed to keep an eye on all other security services. Belarusian-born and educated Valery Vakulchyk was appointed as its head.

Belarusian ministries not in charge of security are a mixed bag. The ministers of emergency response, architecture, labour and information were born in Russia. But Prime Minister Mikhail Miasnikovich and sixteen other ministers were born and educated in Belarus. Among them are the "technocrat" ministers of the economy, finance, tax and industry.

In stark contrast with the Belarusian security services and those in charge of ideology, all seven regional governors were born and educated only in Belarus. The governor of the Mahiliou region also has a degree from Dresden University of Technology. All of the regional governors, save one, are in their 50s and 60s.

Efficient and Relatively Honest Bureaucracy

Too often, the issue of what constitutes the regime remains unaddressed. Yet it holds immense significance, since at present, anyone who is not engaged directly with the opposition is blindly categorized as a collaborator with the current regime. Most importantly, the numerous bureaucrats at work today who will play a decisive part in the transformation of the Belarusian regime and help determine its future are alienated.

The role of Belarusian bureaucrats is evident. Belarus does not look like a run-down failed state like some other former Soviet Union republics. It has a much more developed, functioning infrastructure compared to the Balkan nations or many regions of Russia.

Unlike some other undemocratic regimes, the Belarusian regime does not tolerate outright corruption as a reward for support. Even absolute loyalty to Lukashenka provides no guarantees.

Even today many agencies of the Belarusian government are responsive to organised protests and petitions. Of course, the authorities punish such public activity. But they also have to react to it. Look no further than the 2012 public protest against a huge Chinese investment project in Smalyavichy, a town to the south of Minsk.

Another positive feature of the Belarusian nomenclature is its rather honest performance. Unlike some other undemocratic regimes, the Belarusian regime does not tolerate outright corruption as a reward for support. Even absolute loyalty to Lukashenka provides no guarantees.

The Belarusian Deputy Minister of Internal Affairs, Colonel Yauhen Poludzien, has been charged with abuse of power and was sentenced recently to three and a half years imprisonment. Colonel Poludzen was certainly loyal. He oversaw the police beatings and kidnappings of participants in the silent protests this year, and has earned a travel ban from the EU. Since the beginning of 2013, two other relatively high-level officials have been sentenced to long terms in prison for corruption crimes: Ihar Vasilyeu, former deputy mayor of Minsk, and Hlieb Byadrycki, former head of the secretariat of Council of Republic (upper chamber of the Parliament).

However, the regime insiders jailed on corruption charges have a chance to be pardoned and may even return to high-ranking positions. In 2008, for instance, the Supreme Court sentenced Alyaksandr Barouski, the Former Director of the largest state-owned oil company Belnaftakhim, to five years for "abusing his official position". But already in 2009, Barouski was appointed General Director of MAZ, a major Belarusian truck-building enterprise. A similar case of a corrupt high-level official in the police department of Hrodna Province being pardoned happened last year.

Lukashenka has plenty of reasons to fear the nomenclature, as he is incapable of satisfying their growing material demands. Notably, the 2011 amendments to Belarusian legislation which extend the powers of the security services - in particular the KGB's right to enter private houses and use firearms and physical force - seem to be an attempt to increase control over regime insiders, rather than a move to persecute a democratic opposition already demoralized by past crackdowns. It is possible that parts of the nomenclature, with support from influential groups in the Russian leadership, will remove the Belarusian leader. For now, it is the foremost threat to Lukashenka's survival.

Not All the President's Men: the Nomenclature and Democracy Prospects

Some researchers have proposed that the Belarusian regime should be considered 'sultanistic' because there is no real political activity in the country outside the presidential palace. By sultanistic, American scholar Richard Snyder means "the ruler's maintenance of authority through personal patronage rather than through ideology, charisma or impersonal law".

Political scholars have already studied the transformations of such regimes. And their predictions are gloomy. Sultanistic regimes have immense problems with transitions to democratic government (compared with authoritarian ones), and even if they manage to build some kind of democracy, it tends to display many features of sultanism for many years after. Usually, only charismatic leaders with democratic beliefs manage to lead their nations from sultanism to democracy[1]. It appears that Belarus currently has no politicians who would be charismatic enough.

Thus, when in summer and autumn 2011 and due to a severe economic crisis, Lukashenka's state was in its most precarious position since the 1996 face-off between President and Parliament, the hard times immediately demonstrated cracks in the Belarusian establishment. Only Russian financial aid and the weakness of the opposition which had nothing to propose dissenters among the ruling elite has allowed Lukashenka to survive 2011.

Since the late 1990s, nothing of this kind has ever happened. If some high-ranking official challenged regime policies – for example, Kazulin or Marynich – he first left for the opposition. In 2011, however, the 'rebels' managed to stay in their positions. The hot topic was economic policy.

Only Russian financial aid and the weakness of the opposition which had nothing to propose dissenters among the ruling elite has allowed Lukashenka to survive 2011.

In November 2011, the Ministry of the Economy and the Cabinet, including the prime minister, personally attacked Sergey Tkachev, the presidential aide for the economy. Presidential aide of whatever kind is a powerful figure in Belarusian politics, where somebody's influence is linked to his or her closeness to Lukashenka. It is hard to imagine a more unlikely rebel than Prime Minister Mikhail Myasnikovich, a Soviet-era bureaucrat with no outstanding features as a politician. Other critical voices belonged to people without any dissident affiliation: Vice Prime Minister Siarhei Rumas and Minister for the Economy Mikalai Snapkou.

Despite their loyalist background, they rebelled and even created the illusion of an almost public political struggle in a country where the opposition is in disarray and an entire society has for years lived under tight control. Some commentators hurried to dismiss the whole conflict as irrelevant to national political development since, after all, everyone involved in this story was a proven follower of Lukashenka.

Yury Drakakhrust of Radio Liberty, however, stated that there were a lot of examples of regime change in the world with transformation starting as quarrels among loyalists.

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1 For a thorough discussion of the issue along these lines see: Sultanistic Regimes. Edited by H.E. Chehabi and Juan J. Linz. Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998.

For example, Mikhail Gorbachev's perestroika started along Communist party lines, yet finally derailed the whole Communist system.

The mutineers in the Belarusian government demanded little; they simply proposed critical examination of a dire situation in the Belarusian economy: huge inflation, lack of money and eagerness to print it in order to finance doubtful state programs. It is hard to even say that they asked for liberalisation; rather it was an attempt to open eyes.

The breaking lines in the cabinet emerged along some symbolic splits. The prime minister's group confronted not only the presidential aide for the economy, but also ideological hardliners like Anatoli Rubinau who supported a voluntary line of financing of state expenses by essentially printing more money. Curiously, one of the most outspoken of the hardliners was another vice prime minister: extremely pro-Chinese Anatol Tozik, former ambassador to Beijing.

Regime-Linked Business Elite: Are There any Oligarchs in Belarus?

Since March 2012, the EU has been imposing sanctions against some Belarusian businessmen and firms believed to support dictatorship. Most of these firms belong to Vladimir Peftiev. Belarusian and international media often portray him as having a significant role in the regime. However, the significance and influence of the so-called Belarusian "oligarchs" should not be exaggerated.

While in Russia and Ukraine oligarchs form a clique of business moguls which can seriously influence the government, Belarusian "oligarchs" are much poorer and have hardly any clout in national politics. In reality they are just replaceable managers rather than stakeholders of the regime.

> The significance and influence of the so-called Belarusian "oligarchs" should not be exaggerated.

The Belarusian ruler brings them to the top, then puts them in prisons, forgives them and uses them again as he deems proper. Their function is to run profitable firms and take care of whatever the regime permits them to.

Three of the "oligarchs" became prominent for being the most important for the regime – Uladzimir Peftiev, Yury Czyzh and Alexander Shakutin. Andrzej Poczobut of Polish Gazeta Wyborcza called Peftiev "doubtless No.1". Independent Belarusian media estimated his property at about $1bn. Although the basis for such an estimate is unclear, they nicknamed him "Lukashenka's purse".

Both Western and opposition media can easily assign Peftiev the role of main villain because he worked in the arms trade. Lukashenka inherited Peftiev with his lucrative military export business from previous Belarusian leader Vyachaslau Kebich. Peftiev is also doing business with both sons of the current ruler. In addition to arms trading, he has interests in alcohol production, the lottery and various branches in construction.

He probably has the most international interests among all Belarusian "oligarchs", as his firms own property and operate abroad, in Malta, Austria, the UAE and India, according to internet daily *Ezhednevnik*. Peftiev himself prefers to spend most of his time in Malta rather then residing in Belarus. When in July 2011 the EU put him on a travel ban list, Lukashenka publicly swore that he had seen Peftiev "not more than

three times" and had not taken money from him.

Other "oligarchs" are by far much poorer. The 48-year old Yury Chyzh frequently appears alongside Lukashenka at public events. Chyzh owns the Triple Corporation which is famous in Belarus for its soft drinks. He also has extensive business interests in construction as well as Russian oil imports, reprocessing and exports. Slovenia vetoed putting a travel ban on Czyzh because a Slovenian firm is now building a Kempinski Hotel in Minsk together with Chyzh. The other international interests of Czyzh also include biofuel production in Lithuania and Latvia.

The wealth and the role of third "key oligarch" 52-years old Alexander Shakutin is very questionable. He chairs the board of directors for Amkodor, a corporation which works in road construction, cleaning and forestry machinery. He is also one of Amkador's shareholders.

But his role in Amkodor probably is just a formal position because the firm effectively belongs to a Nepalese businessman. Trained as a physician, Shakutin worked in health and had his own medical equipment business. Then, his old Nepalese fellow student from the Minsk Medical Institute brought Shakutin into the management of Amkodor in the early 2000s to consolidate his control over the firm. The logic of Shakutin's companion is clear: even today the Belarusian state does not like too many foreign faces in directorial positions.

Shakutin has the prestigious yet completely irrelevant regalia of being a member of the upper chamber of the Parliament. That chamber is even weaker than the lower one, which has no power whatsoever. He also has a position on the board of one of the pro-Lukashenka movements called Belaya Rus. This movement has absolutely no function in current Belarusian politics.

"Oligarchs" are simply bigger shareholders of the regime, and are far from being controlling shareholders.

Other "oligarchs" own relatively big businesses by Belarusian standards but can hardly be called accomplices of the dictator. None of them has a guarantee of their personal security or the security of their businesses.

In autumn 2011, the KGB arrested Viktar Shaucou, a big businessman with interests in banking and construction. Shaucou was charged with committing financial offences in construction projects undertaken by his firm, Belzarubezhstroy, in Venezuela. Since the 1990s, he actively supported Belarusian foreign policy aimed at establishing links with developing countries which involved sometimes rather sensitive deals. His Trustbank – back then called Infobank - worked with Saddam Hussein's Iraq and has been on the US sanctions list because of these dealings.

Regime Shareholders: How to Work with Them?

The director of the Belarusian Institute of Strategic Studies Alaksiej Pikulik once described the Belarusian regime as a kind of joint-stock company. Its shareholders support Lukashenka and get their dividends for it. But, "there is no tradition of promising shareholders freedom and independence instead of dividends". "Oligarchs" are simply bigger shareholders of the regime, and are far from being controlling shareholders.

Of course, they run some business enterprises both for their own profits and on behalf of the regime. This is a kind of developmental state model. It emerges with the fusion of the political regime and business, though the state remains the dominant party and allows the oligarchs to take only so much. At the same time, the state redirects some of the profits gained to the economic development of the country as a whole[2].

Belarusian officials and Lukashenka himself have repeatedly expressed their admiration for the authoritarian regimes of South-East Asia like Singapore or Malaysia which have had such models for decades. But they could also look at Putin's Russia and Nazarbayev's Kazakhstan, where this kind of relationship between government and business was only implemented quite recently. Of course, the partnerships in these two countries seem to serve those directly involved, and not to be in the best national interests.

There are no functioning legal norms or courts which would allow you to protect private property of any significance without the approval of the regime. Both rich and poor are equal in this regard.

But currently, under Belarusian circumstances, the role of even the biggest businessman is insignificant. Former Russian economy minister Evgenii Yasin recently expressed it eloquently: "Belarus, you have one oligarch – Lukashenka. And he runs everything. Well, some people ["oligarchs"] emerge to whom he can give an order: listen, invest there and there. That is it!"

In fact, it could not be otherwise. There is no real private property in the country. There are no functioning legal norms or courts which would allow you to protect private property of any significance without the approval of the regime. Both rich and poor are equal in this regard. All Belarusian "oligarchs" are simply managers who can be replaced and stripped of their property at any moment.

That means that sanctions against "oligarchs" are a nice gesture but their implications are doubtful. They do not threaten the foundations of the regime. Rather, they support and cement the current situation when big businessmen are just servants of the regime with no escape. Moreover, as the example of Shakutin shows, the list of the biggest the "oligarchs" may contain significant mistakes. The sanctions against oligarchs only pay lip service to democracy or human rights, without actually promoting them.

Conclusions: Things Change

There is no reason to doubt that the Belarusian regime is currently undergoing a transformation – it cannot be otherwise in the aftermath of the collapse of its political economy following Russia stopping Lukashenka's lucrative oil deals with Western Europe. Its gradual evolution from personal rule towards more loose authoritarianism and competition between clans is quite natural; according to existing scholarship, such regimes always evolve this way.

In addition, Lukashenka has had only ad hoc charisma and failed to create his personality cult: there is neither serious glorification of his life, nor consistent ideology based on Lukashenka's ideas. Of course, he had for many years maintained high approval ratings, yet that was always a political brinkmanship in playing with masses. Lukashenka could rely neither on any organisation (he always opposed attempts to create one) nor on profound ideological indoctrination of the masses or even elites.

[1] The argument is laid out in more details here: Jury Drakachrust, Pierspiektyvy Bielaruskaha Rezhymu, Radio Liberty, 22.04.2008. http://www.svaboda.org/content/transcript/1107674.html accessed 01.04. 2013.

Both these groups simply had a deal with him, and will obey only as far as he can deliver on his dues. In the context of prolonged economic hardships, no one can expect that regime insiders will stay loyal to their lord out of faithfulness.

Democratisation will not be achieved overnight in Belarus. Even the Ukrainian Orange Revolution brought out a contradictory balance, and Ukraine will require years to change, although it has never been under such tight control as Belarus has experienced for years. One of the most important problems in Belarus is the weakness of its democratic opposition. In such circumstances, to oppose Lukashenka's system one has to work with people who may have a murky background and unsympathetic positions: regime incumbents.

Isolation and lack of Western contacts with the Belarusian nomenclature might be dangerous for Belarus as an independent nation. If Belarusian incumbents have no other options, they will also turn to Moscow and follow increasingly authoritarian political trends there. Yet ideologically a number of them are unable to resist the benefits of the West, and while denying democracy and human rights to their own people, they nevertheless try to send their own children to the West to study and enjoy a better life.

On the other hand, Belarusian officials do not have the guts to effectively resist the regime on their own. Their dissent could be exploited by an external force - most likely from Russia - to make Lukashenka understand his vulnerability and dependence on Moscow's goodwill. This is one of the most popular theories to explain the crackdown which followed the 19 December 2010 presidential elections.

Under these circumstances, it would be crucial for the West to view the situation in Belarus not only through democracy and human rights lenses. The most important task at the moment is to maintain the independent existence of Belarus as a European nation. Europe should articulate other, non-Russian prospects to the regime incumbents to make them understand that they can lead comfortable lives without Lukashenka and without resorting to the illegal practices of the current regime.

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The small core of die-hard regime insiders should be isolated from the majority of public servants who just do their work as best they can under the present conditions, a workforce who are also willing to see an alternative to the current political regime. Nothing serves Lukashenka better than the wall of misunderstanding that has been erected between the Belarusian bureaucracy and the opposition, a barrier that works to the benefit of neither party.

Belarus as a functioning state needs a government, and the government and its administrative and other organs should be distinguished from those repressive bodies set up only to support the dictatorship. Instead of deciding on whether a certain type of conduct is in service of or should be considered collaboration with the regime, the opponents of the Belarusian regime would be well served if they focused on the effects of those actions rather than just on the affiliation of those carrying them out.

It is possible for the West to work with the ruling establishment in Belarus as responsible and reasonable partners. However, nobody should expect to reinvent themselves as true democrats over night. The Soviet system and its indoctrination has made them cynical about values and ideologies. Neither threats levelled at the regime nor adventurous revolutionising of Belarusian society will help to change the situation

in the country.

Pragmatic deals, reaching out to ordinary people and engaging the elites to demonstrate the clear benefits of dealing with Europe will surely do that. Western deals with Eastern European Communist rulers and lower-level outreach to ordinary citizens did just that and made possible transformations in those countries. Many such projects will be disrupted by Lukashenka: it is unavoidable. Yet it is exactly such disruptions of reasonable pragmatic projects which will convince both cynical bureaucrats and apolitical citizens of the necessity of getting rid of him; it will do so much better than elevated rhetoric about European values.

Annex. Some Key Players of the Belarusiian Regime

1. Viktar Lukashenka: Heir Apparent?

Viktar Lukashenka is a big enigma. The 37 year-old lieutenant-colonel and the oldest son of the current ruler is rumoured by the media and population to be the next leader of Belarus. Although Lukashenka has three sons, only Viktar has any status as a political figure. Since Viktar became the National Security Aide to his father, many analysts have come to explain every move inside the regime in terms of Viktar's influence.

On his trips to Arab countries Viktar Lukashenka has been meeting with the future successors of Arab leaders as his counterparts. But his father does not intend to step down anytime soon. With the current president being only 58 years of age, and having no evident health problems, Viktar may have to bide his time.

Rise to Power

Viktar Lukashenka has been a successor in the making for many years. In the 1990s, he studied at the International Relations Department of the Belarus State University, the most prestigious institution of higher education in Belarus. Already at that time, Viktar displayed his ambitions in a documentary made by NTV channel. When he and his younger brother Dzmitry were asked whether they could imagine replacing their father as president, Viktar said, "Why not?", while Dzmitry replied with a firm "no".



After completing his studies, Viktar first served in the Border Guards. Viktar claims that he belonged to the special forces unit, but it is rumoured that he was assigned to the regular staff in Minsk. In a rare interview, he hinted at his participation in operations planning.

From the Border Guards, he switched to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, where he worked from 2001-2003 in the Western Europe Department. From there, Viktar jumped into a new role and became Chief of the Foreign Department at Agat, a state-owned corporation that handles defence contracts for automated control systems.

In 2005, President Lukashenka appointed his 29 year-old son as his National Security Aide, a position created just for him. In 2007, Viktar joined the Security Council, a high-level organ of the regime. By that time he had become involved in sensitive dealings. He regularly visited Libya, Oman, and some other Middle Eastern nations, meeting mostly top leadership and security officials.

Although Viktar kept a low profile, opponents of the regime started to publicly discuss Viktar as a prospective president after he became National Security Aide. Speaking to *Le Monde* in 2007, Lukashenka explained, "When I appointed my son to be my assistant, I wanted to open additional channels to get information. No head of state can have absolute trust in his followers, so my son helps me".

Political analyst Andrei Liakhovich believes that Viktar shaped major reshuffles among Lukashenka's top officials in 2007-08. Some important regime figures lost their influence and offices. Among them was regime grey eminence Viktar Sheiman, Secretary of the Security Council. Viktar's friends gained influential offices: first of all Uladzimir Makiej, the current chief of the Presidential Administration.

Viktar consolidated his power and promoted his confidants from the Border Guards and KGB Brest Section to influential positions. Lukashenka Junior also played different government organs off against one another. He allied with the Internal Ministry against the KGB, which resulted in the appointment of Vadzim Zaytsau, Viktar's close friend, as new chief of the KGB.

Viktar then relied on the KGB while trying to overtake other agencies. In 2009, a former ally, Interior minister Uladzimir Naumau, was dismissed. Even so, the Interior remained beyond Viktar's control. Only in late 2011, after the arrest of the Deputy Internal Minister Yauhien Poludzien and dismissal of another Deputy Minister, was one of them replaced by a former KGB member and confidant of Viktar's. By that time, Viktar had already formed his own security agency – the Operative-Analytical Centre of the President.

Accused of Political Suppression

The Operative-Analytical Centre focuses on surveillance in the IT sphere but also deals with corruption and political dissent. It soon took measures to enforce control over the internet. For instance, in 2010, the government adopted changes in internet regulation prepared by the Centre. They required mandatory registration of Belarusian websites in national segments of the internet, and strengthened the requirements on identification of users. The amendments provoked a negative reaction among the population. But the situation with the internet did not change significantly and the repressive intentions of Viktar's new structure have been exaggerated.

> Only charismatic leaders with democratic beliefs manage to lead their nations from sultanism to democracy.

In September 2011, Lukashenka created the Investigative Committee, a new agency to take over the investigative functions of the Internal Ministry, the Public Prosecution Office, and the Committee of State Control. The move provoked a new wave of speculation that the president was looking to strengthen Viktar's position. But as political analyst Alyaksey Myadvietski has pointed out, there is little evidence of this, and indeed, "almost every significant change of official in security agencies is explained now by Viktar's influence".

Is Viktar demonised? The Charter 97 website believes that he was engaged in a crackdown on protests after the last presidential elections. Radical opposition activist Uladzimir Baradach has said that Viktar's "personal team" might have been behind the terrorist attack in the Minsk subway. But again there are no facts to back up these claims.

Indeed, according to cables published by Wikileaks, US diplomat Jonathan Moore has characterised Viktar as adamant but attentive and polite after meeting him in 2008. In public, Viktar has been courteous and allowed the public to freely take pictures of him. In a 2008 Wikileaks document on the Border Guards, Viktar seemed to feel uneasy about all the attention he was getting.

For the time being, Lukashenka's oldest son seems too weak politically to run the

country. He lacks his father's charisma, and has yet to prove his administrative abilities. However, in the post-Soviet space, the Azerbaijani precedent of power succession within one family suggests that Viktar's chances as successor should not be underestimated.
Many ordinary Azerbaijanis and foreign analysts doubted[3] that the current president of Azerbaijan would last even one year. Ilham Aliyev was known more for his casino exploits and embezzlement than for political achievements. In his first year in power Ilham completely depended on old elites. But he succeeded.
Of course, Belarus is not Azerbaijan and has different traditions. Viktar also has one major weakness compared to Ilham: his lack of international recognition. Ilham served as Deputy Chairman of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe before assuming office as president. Viktar's biggest international achievement so far was to land on the EU travel ban list.

Most probably, there is no succession plan at this point. Lukashenka is eager to retain power for as long as possible. He even jokes that his youngest son Mikalai – now seven years old – will be the president. Unlike Mikalai, however, Viktar grew up at a time when his father was not yet president. Viktar knows ordinary life, and had personally experienced the misery of the late Soviet period. That makes him different to those dictators' children who have never seen the world without bodyguards.



2. The Unsinkable Mikhail Myasnikovich

Prime Minister Mikhail Myasnikovich is a veteran of Belarusian politics. He served as Deputy Prime Minister of Soviet Byelorussia and then independent Belarus and was the key aide of Prime Minister Kebich, the main rival of Alexander Lukashenka in the 1994 presidential elections. In the 1990s, Lukashenka even promised to imprison him for corruption. But after being elected, the first president changed his mind and started to cooperate with him.

Having worked as the head of the Presidential Administration in the 1990s and the National Academy of Science in the 2000s, Myasnikovich became the Prime Minister of Belarus in December 2010. Many regard him as the shrewd and unsinkable leader of the Belarusian bureaucracy who is able to significantly influence the situation in the country.

Building Communism

62-year old Myasnikovich comes from a village in Nyasvizh District, a hundred kilometres to the south-west of Minsk. He graduated from Brest Civil Engineering Institute, and later completed advanced studies at Minsk High Party School.

His background shows no accomplishments of particular merit. In the 1970s, engineer Myasnikovich worked in water supply and municipal services in Minsk. In the 1980s, he made a good carrier in the Minsk Soviets. In those times, Soviets – councils – formally had significant authority but in practise were just an instrument used by the

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1 An illustration of scepticism about Ilham Aliyev's ability to run the country on his own: Ilkhamovo Tsarstvo, Zhurnal Kommersant Vlast, №43 (646), 31.10.2005, http://kommersant.ru/doc/622324.

Communist Party to legitimise its rule.

In the mid-1980s, Myasnikovich became a Secretary of Minsk City Committee of the Communist Party of Belarus, in charge of running the capital. Until the collapse of the Soviet Union, Myasnikovich served as the Minister of Housing and Public Utilities and the head of the State Committee for Economy and Planning.

In 1991, Myasnikovich becomes Deputy Prime Minister of Soviet Belarus, soon to become independent Belarus. He was a prominent official in the government of Vyachaslau Kebich, and was allegedly in charge of his boss' highly controversial deals. When then little-known member of Parliament Alexander Lukashenka launched his anti-corruption campaign, he lashed out at Myasnikovich as one of the most corrupt government members. Myasnikovich then led Kebich's presidential campaign, some say rather reluctantly.

Too many people spoke about the leader of the nomenclature as a possible presidential candidate capable of removing Lukashenka.

After election Lukashenka decided to employ cadres of his predecessor Kebich. Myasnikovich got his job back, and then continued his rise to power as the head of the powerful Presidential Administration – the key decision-making body of the regime. He was apparently rewarded. Late director of the Belarusian Institute for Strategic Studies Vital Silicki argued that Myasnikovich was a leader of the Kebich-era nomenclature. Led by Mikhail Myasnikovich, the nomenclature swiftly switched its loyalties to Lukashenka.

The Brain of Belarusian Government

In the late 1990s, Lukashenka established and consolidated his regime, destroying fragile democratic institutions, parties, media and civil society. Myasnikovich displayed no liberalism while serving as a top official in those years. At that time such public figures as former National Bank head Bahdankievich or Prime Minister Mikhail Chyhir protested against Lukashenka's policies and lost their offices. Moreover, Myasnikovich as a major figure actively participated in dissolving the Parliament opposed to the president and the successful consolidation of Lukashenka's power in November 1996.

However, after the 2001 presidential elections Myasnikovich landed in a marginal position as the head of the National Academy of Sciences. Lukashenka might have had good reasons to sideline him. Too many people spoke about the leader of the nomenclature as a possible presidential candidate capable of removing Lukashenka. He himself displayed no ambitions, but Belarusian media published unconfirmed documents about an alleged investigation of a conspiracy against the president which involved Myasnikovich.

In his decade long exile in the Academy of Sciences, Myasnikovich achieved ambiguous results. He directed institutes of the Academy to undertake production activities and appointed people without scholarly credentials to run these institutes. But even highly-critical-of-the-regime station Radio Liberty admitted that Myasnikovich made the management system of the Academy more professional, bringing in qualified administrators. Remarkably, he stayed rather humble and became a correspondent member of the Academy only in 2009.

Making a bureaucratic carreer did not prevent Myasnikovich from making money. In

2006, the United Civic Party re-published the list of the 50 richest men in Belarus. Myasnikovich was among them, with assests totalling US$296m.

Almost no one expected that Myasnikovich would pursue new economic policies after he became Prime Minister in 2010. Many years ago he was considered to be a cautious supporter of market reforms. Former National Bank director Stanislau Bahdankevich, however, points out the controversy surrounding the views of Myasnikovich: “I think he understands the necessity of some market reforms, but I do not see that Myasnikovich profoundly believes in them”.

Most commentators emphasised that he was simply a good administrator of the old school type. “He is very strict and precise, always controlling decisions taken and their implementation,” said the former chairman of the National Bank Stanislau Bahdankievich.

Being in the government he retained some of his critical mindset and scholarly ambitions. In 1994, he defended his doctorate on “Emergence of the Market Economy in Belarus: Conditions and Factors”. In the late 1990s, he defended another research degree on “Formation of Financial Industrial Groups in Transit Economies (The cases of Belarus and Russia)”. Both texts were published, something unusual for nomenclature scholars who usually hide their writings.

Myasnikovich does not demonise people if they move over to the opposition.

In 2004, Myasnikovich published one more book on innovations in the Belarusian economy, in which he criticised many aspects of the Soviet economic and administrative system. In his book he also demonstrates familiarity with key Western authors writing on the topic. In addition, he reportedly has some command of English – a rarity among Belarusian officials.

Myasnikovich likes to pay tribute to old thinking, yet displays some critical faculty as well. He said, for example, that the Chinese mode of development would be a better model compared with the Soviet one.

Nevertheless, in 2007 – well before the current crisis - he criticised the Belarusian economic model. As Head of the National Academy of Sciences he declared his belief that the industrial policy of the government has no prospects and that the economy should be technologically modernised.

Grand Vizier Against Ruler’s Son?

There is another interesting feature of his character. Myasnikovich does not demonise people if they move over to the opposition. He phoned the family of late Hienadz Karpienka – a major opponent of Lukashenka – after Karpienka’s death in 1999. He attended the funeral of dissident writer Vasil Bykau in 2003. In June 2011, Myasnikovich reportedly consulted with opposition politician Bahdankievich and even offered him a job.

Sviatlana Kalinkina, chief editor of the *Narodnaya Volya* daily, notes that Myasnikovich is a “dove” looking for compromises. She explaines his survival in politics through three unique features. He has connections and networks among the nomenclature; good contacts in Russia; and he is a good negotiator. Now as prime minister he has become a counterweight to the group of officials from security agencies led among others by Viktar Lukashenka.

No wonder, then, that in late 2011 the Prime Minister used harsh words to attack the presidential aide on economy issues. Another member of his cabinet called the situation in the country a "shame", as new rumours about the disloyalty of the nomenclature and Mikhail Myasnikovich emerged. Yury Drakakhrust of Radio Liberty even described the "uprising of the Government against the Presidential Administration".

The uprising never materialised, yet undoubtedly one of the ways to achieve changes in Belarus is to deal with the bureaucracy and their robust and shrewd leader. Mikhail Myasnikovich alone can persuade Lukashenka to change his ways much more easily than all the opposition put together. He is the grand vizier in Lukashenka's state.
Myasnikovich embodies both the traps and opportunities related to the Belarusian bureaucracy. He is cautious with everything new and lacks his own initiative, but still remains a rather effective manager. He, like the rest of the bureaucracy, does not really have a vision of his own and leans on Moscow, but could become a partner for the West.

The prerequisite for such partnership is a consensus on the part of both Belarusian elites and the EU about the gradual transformation of the country which will allow the Belarusian establishment to retain or enhance at least some assets and leverage they have while changing the path of national development. Another prerequisite is reasonable aid to Belarus to modernise its economy. Of course, such a deal means also avoiding a revolution and political transition lasting for many years, and all these details make it difficult for Western politicians. But without such assurances the Belarusian ruling elites can hardly be expected to change their ways, as it would be political and economic suicide for them.

3. The Faceless Makey

The opposition analysts used to hope that the head of the Presidential Administration of Belarus Uladzimir Makey would establish better relations with the West. His background created the impression of a sophisticated politician familiar with the West. He made it to the top of the Belarusian regime from a small Belarusian village and shabby army positions.



Indeed, he became the head of the Presidential Administration, effectively Lukashenka's right hand, in 2008, to lead the new rapprochement with the EU. He survived a new wave of confrontation with the West after the last presidential elections and then launched the wide-scale offensive against Western sanctions.
But very soon, in April 2012, Makey again called for restoration of dialogue with the EU, saying that nobody in Belarus doubted the aims of establishing independent democratic state with a strong civil society.

"Belarusian Dream"

Fifty-four-year-old Makey comes from a village in western Hrodna province. He has ambitions and talents but apparently lacked connections. He studied at Minsk Foreign Languages Institute. In the late 1970s it was a place with the best prospects of working with foreigners in Soviet Belarus or abroad. The Belarusian Soviet Socialist Republic was not a forbidden zone for foreigners, yet even foreign tourists were a rarity there. Moreover, for a Soviet Belarusian, even a visit to the neighbouring fellow-Socialist Poland was precluded by quite unpleasant formalities

with the Soviet and party authorities.

However, after graduating with a double major in German and English Makey chose a military carrier. Despite speculations, there are no reasons to say he became a "spy" working for Soviet military intelligence GRU. More likely, he served as a military interpreter or in a similar minor position in 1980-1992.

Russian newspaper *Krasnaya Zvezda* published memoirs of a colleague who worked together with Makey in the 1980s in the Group of Soviet Troops in Germany. Their unit was based in Wünsdorf and conducted surveys of the military and political situation in Western Europe, apparently using open sources. In other words, Makey served as a lower-ranked officer. It was Lukashenka who promoted him to the rank of colonel.

His colleagues were impressed by hard and painstaking work in France – his attempts to maintain working contacts there and analyse possible strategies for Belarusian diplomacy even in the most hopeless of situations as Belarusian-European relations collapsed

After the dissolution of the Soviet Union, Makey quit the Red Army and went to work for the Foreign Ministry of now independent Belarus. In the early 1990s, any person with a decent knowledge of foreign languages might immediately get such a job as the ministry was in the process of formation. Then he was sent for a short-term training course in the Diplomatic Academy in Vienna in 1992-3.

In 1993-1995, he worked at the Foreign Ministry in Minsk, mainly in analytical and protocol sections. In the late 1990s, Makey briefly became the Belarusian representative at the Council of Europe. In January 1997, the Council of Europe effectively broke even minimal relations with the country and Makey stayed in Paris as an adviser of the Belarusian embassy.

His colleagues from those days at the ministry were impressed by Makey's hard and painstaking work in France – his attempts to keep reporting on what was going on in the European institutions, maintain working contacts there and analyse possible strategies for Belarusian diplomacy even in the most hopeless of situations as Belarusian-European relations collapsed.

After returning to Belarus, he headed the European Cooperation Department of the Foreign Ministry and in 2000 became an aide to the president. *Belorusskaya Gazeta* reported later the rumours that Makey got this role simply because Lukashenka had liked one of his speeches at the Foreign Ministry conference.

In Belarus, access to the ruler is key to career success. In July 2008, after an explosion at the Liberation Day festivities, Lukashenka appointed Makey as head of his Presidential Administration, replacing the once powerful Viktar Sheiman. After 1996, confrontation with the Parliament had been won by Lukashenka, and the Administration emerged as real centre of power in Belarus which controlled all major decisions in the country.

In 2008, Lukashenka brought into power a new group of people while getting rid of old cadres including the once powerful No. 2, Viktar Sheiman. Analysts relate the purge to the influence of the president's son. There are undoubtedly good relations between Makey and Viktar Lukashenka. However, they belong to different generations and have too different backgrounds to presume equality between them.

Makey's son from his first marriage works in the Belarusian Foreign Ministry in a good

position. In 2007, Makey-senior married for the second time. His new wife is a much younger actress and TV presenter, Viera Paliakova. She is known for her celebrity talk show Life as It Is on state TV, which started at the time she got engaged to Makey.

Jungle Law

Makey is one of Lukashenka closest associate, but he does not look ideologically charged. He calls the Soviet Union a "great country" but does not display any nostalgia for Communist rule.
He refers to Lukashenka in every second sentence, and even emulates his boss' rough talk. But he also cites Karel Čapek and Nikolay Berdyaev, and rather enjoys recalling the squares and fish markets of Brussels in his interviews.

Already as the head of Administration, Makey regularly used Belarusian at meetings of the Public Consultative Council – something extraordinary for regime's officials.

Makey is a representative of an opportunistic political clique which simply wishes that the West would leave it to its own devices. Speaking at the Belarus-Germany forum in 2009, he rebuked the West for assessing the situation in Belarus by considering the scale of reforms only in the political sphere.

Later on, he outwardly dismissed Western moral foundations, declaring in 2011, "A jungle law effectively dominates the world. "Everyone for himself", i.e. the rule of stronger functions, i.e. the stronger has the right and will dictate his will. It causes a series of armed conflicts. How to survive in this situation, preserve the country, multiply its wealth – that is the question".

But these words do not make him a hardliner. Chairman of the United Civic Party Anatol Lyabedzka recalled his contacts with Makey in the late 1990s: "He never refused to meet representatives of the political opposition, was rather open to talk, and demonstrated some adherence to European values".

Already as the head of Administration, Makey regularly used Belarusian at meetings of the Public Consultative Council – something extraordinary for regime's officials. Last time Lukashenka officially spoke in this language was in 2003, and Belarusian is permanently under persecution by the state authorities. Chairman of the Belarusian Language Society Alieh Trusau emphasised that at the meetings of all officials only Makey switched to Belarusian - rather unconventional behaviour for the nomenclature.

Makey's dry and inarticulate public speeches are remarkable even among other such Belarusian officials. The Moscow-based website *Belaruski Partyzan* called the usually gloomy-looking Makey "a man without face". And yet, he is one of the faces of the Belarusian regime and one of its key decision-makers.

Indeed, Makey may facilitate transformation of the current regime and make deals with the West. Of course, he demonstrates no firm adherence to democracy, and he has no vision of his own and no great political ambitions, unlike for instance the much younger Viktar Lukashenka. In this regard he resembles the Prime Minister Mikhail Myasnikovich. Makey will be able to remain a shadow analyst and executive secretary under any Belarusian ruler.

4. Lukashenka's Right-Hand Man: Andrei Kabyakou

The presidential administration is the centre of the Belarusian regime. It controls all state bodies including the government and Parliament. The head of the presidential administration is the right hand of the president. On 27 August 2012, Alexander Lukashenka appointed Andrei Kabyakou (age 52) to that very office.

Moscow-born Russian Kabyakou has been one of the closest people to the Belarusian ruler since the 1990s. Some analysts predict that his appointment means that privatisation will soon come as well as increased Russian clout. Others believe that his loyalty to Moscow is exaggerated and he will faithfully work in the interests of the Belarusian authorities.

Rocket False Start

Lukashenka considers Kabyakou's Russian origins to be no problem. Appointing Kabyakou to the position of ambassador in Moscow last December, he emphasised, "Half of our officials are Russians". Among them defence minister and head of president's security service. Foreign-born candidates are preferable also for other reasons: according to the constitution they may not run for president. The Belarusian state has been an inclusive one in terms of ethnic diversity. It had among its ministers even a Volga Tatar and an Azerbaijani.



Kabyakou was born in 1960 in Moscow. His father was a political officer in the Soviet air force and served in Belarus. Therefore, Andrei has lived in the country since he was three years old. He emphasised: "And what shall I do in Moscow? Right, I was born there, but since 1963 I have lived here. I am not going to leave our country [Belarus]".

In 1983, Andrei graduated from the prestigious Moscow Aviation Ordzhonikidze Institute with an engineering diploma in rocket and missile design. His dream was to build rockets, yet he had to work at the Diaproektor factory in the eastern Belarusian city of Rahachou. The enterprise produced optical mechanical equipment, including that used for military purposes.

In 1988, as other people became disappointed with the Communist party and some even publicly burned their party cards, Kabyakou went to work full-time for the party. First, he worked in the organisational department, and then studied simultaneously at the High Party School and the Belarus State Economy Institute. That was false start in his carrier.

After Communist rule crumbled, he returned to the same Rahachou factory. There he became friends with the factory deputy director Vasil Dauhalyou, who would bring Kabyakou to the top of the Belarus ruling elite. Dauhalyou decided to work in 1994 with presidential candidate Lukashenka.

After Lukashenka's victory, he did not forget how Dauhalyou and his people helped him. In 1995, the president made Dauhalyou chairman of the Control Service of the President (later State Control Service), dubbed the "economic security service". Kabyakou followed him as his deputy, then switched for a while to a post in Light Industry Concern only to become in 1998 the Chairman of State Control Service himself.

That was the right path to the top. In 2000, Kabyakou was appointed deputy prime minister, in 2002 the minister of the Economy, and in 2003 the vice prime minister. Among his tasks were financial issues and the Customs Union, which Belarus joined under Russian pressure. Yet it does not mean that his goal was to bring Belarus into Russia's orbit. Many integration initiatives pursued by Minsk were smart tricks to get badly needed Russian support for the unreformed and unmodernised Belarusian economy. Their list grows: Union State of Belarus and Russia, Custom Union, Single Economic Space … while Russia and Belarus increasingly diverge in their development.

> Kabyakou is definitely not a grey official simply executing orders. In November 2007, as vice prime minister for economic issues, he made it into the headlines after shouting at Lukashenka.

Union State as a Trap for the Russian Bear

In December 2011 Kabyakou became ambassador to Russia. Immediately after the appointment he declared on Belarusian TV that his main priority would be the establishment of the Single Economic Space. The Customs Union had created some serious problems for the Belarusian government as Russia had increasingly gained control over Belarusian reexports of reprocessed Russian oil – one of the vital sources of income for Belarus. The single Economic Space could restore to the Belarusian government this lucrative oil business.

In this context Kabyakou's words about the Single Economic Space sound ambiguous: "That is a higher stage of integration within the Customs Union. That is a stage where our fundamental problematic issues shall be solved, the issues which existed in our trade and economic relations. It concerns equal prices for gas, equal conditions in oil and oil products trade, etc".

Even more ambiguous were Kabyakou's statements in a December 2011 interview for *Rossiyskaya Gazeta*. He so pathetically elaborated in general, declarative terms the advantages and achievements of the "Union State of Belarus and Russia," that it sounded like insincere lip service.

The Union was launched in 1997 and allowed Russian elites to satisfy their emotional sentiments for the lost Soviet empire. The Belarusian leadership used it pragmatically to extract from the Kremlin exorbitant subsidies. Minsk managed to give nothing essential in return to Russia. Belarus spoke with brash slogans and resorted to unrealistic demands anytime Moscow tried to commit it to something. Thus, Lukashenka agreed to introduce a single currency if he was given the opportunity to print money as well.

Putin's Blood

As ambassador, Kabyakou not only proclaimed himself an "apologist of the Union State", playing on sentiments of Russian nationalists. He directly participated in very important negotiations for the Belarusian economy, among them those tied to oil export duties. Lukashenka was satisfied with his performance there.

The Belarusian leader was not the only one to notice Kabyakou's defence of Belarusian interests. When Russian President Putin was visiting Belarus in May and saw Kabyakou at negotiations, he made the following remark: "He has sucked so much blood out of me this past year - and now they sent him to us to Moscow to suck the

rest out of me..".

Kabyakou is definitely not a grey official simply executing orders. In November 2007, as vice prime minister for economic issues, he made it into the headlines after shouting at Lukashenka. After the Belarusian ruler once again put forth a very questionable economic agenda, Kabyakou openly and very emotionally explained to him that although Lukashenka could set "crazy tasks", it would end in catastrophe. In a Belarusian context, this requires a lot of courage.

What motivates the Moscow-born and educated Kabyakou to work for the Belarusian state? Shortly after being appointed ambassador in Moscow he said that he "returned home". But Kabyakou's Russian identity and loyalty is probably not particularly strong. There are Russians who underwent even more radical transformation and undersigned the Belarusian national project. Among them, one of the leaders of the national democrats in the early 1990s and today's chairman of the Belarusian Language Society, Aleh Trusau.

Personal ambition to get to the top might be also a crucial factor. Kabyakou has managed to do that in Lukashenka's Belarus and he is going to continue serving it. Furthermore, he might defend Belarus's interests even more relentlessly, just to prove that his loyalty lies with the government in Minsk rather than his formally native Moscow.

5. Sheiman: The Last Soldier of President Lukashenka

In late January 2013, Belarusian leader Alexander Lukashenka appointed Viktar Sheiman as head of the President's Property Administration, the biggest state-owned business empire and the financial backbone of Lukashenka's regime. Barely any other officials of the Belarusian regime are demonised by its opponents as much as General Viktar Sheiman.



Most media and oppositional politicians ascribe his involvement in every alleged nasty doing of the ruling clique and call him the grey eminence of the regime. But some opposition activists remember him from the early 1990s and cannot believe that this can be the same person they knew back then.

Like most of Lukashenka's men, he had no hopes of making it very high up in the Soviet system, as he was quite ordinary until he joined forces with Lukashenka. And still it was this very man, a paratrooper from a provincial garrison, who together with the Belarusian ruler created today's Belarus.

Village Boy

Viktar Sheiman, 54, was born in a village in a remote rural district on the border with Lithuania, the only one in Belarus dominated by an ethnic minority: the Voranava, populated mostly by Belarusian Poles. With such a humble background he managed to enter only a military school in the deeply provincial Soviet Far East called Blagoveshchensk Tank Command High School. He graduated in 1979 as Soviet troops began their campaign in Afghanistan. Sheiman went to that war as an officer of the Soviet Airborne Troops, the most intensively deployed group of Soviet forces during

the conflict.

By 1990, he became a major and was lucky enough to get an assignment to a garrison in his native Belarus. Perestroika was already succeeding and Sheiman joined the political struggle. He got elected to the then vibrant Parliament of Soviet Belarus and took part in establishing a nationalistic Belarusian Alliance of Soldiers (BZV).

Former colleagues who remain in the opposition remember him as a sincere patriot, openly supportive of the Belarusian language and of national symbols abolished later by Lukashenka.

Siarhei Navumchyk of the Christian Conservative Party of Belarusian People's Front recalls Sheiman in positive terms as an open minded and pleasant man. Have the games of power with Lukashenka destroyed him, wondered recently Navumchyk speaking on Radio Liberty?

In post-Soviet Belarus, however, the military was clearly a bad place to make a career. For a while, Sheiman worked in Parliament, where he befriended many current opponents of Lukashenka and was elected as the secretary of the parliamentary Commission on National Security, Defence and Crime Control. In addition to this he studied law. His time came in 1994. That year he joined the ambitious team of the future Belarusian president.

Sheiman helped to revive security agencies – police, special services and the military – severely battered and effectively paralysed after the dissolution of the Soviet Union.

A young decorated veteran with political experience was a valuable asset to Lukashenka who built his election campaign by fiercely attacking ruling Soviet nomenclatura elites. A director of a collective farm, Lukashenka was despised by most professionals, and as a result, he initially had few qualified people in his team. In August 1994, as soon as Lukashenka won the presidential election, he appointed Sheiman to a top position: State Secretary of the newly formed Security Council of Belarus.

Many members of Lukashenka's team very soon fell out with him. But not Sheiman. He firmly stood behind the boss. In December 1995, as Lukashenka embarked on his struggle to weaken and dissolve the Parliament and ultimately establish an authoritarian regime, he appointed Sheiman to lead the key Ministry of the Interior.

They won the fight together by crushing street protests, changing the constitution and destroying any meaningful opposition in the late 1990s. The stern-looking former paratrooper Sheiman, who never gave interviews, did his best to create the sterile political landscape of today's Belarus. It meant crushing street protests like the huge demonstrations of the Minsk Spring – 1996 - restricting media freedom (e.g. by banning publications about government corruption within Lukashenka's retinue), paralysing activities of political parties by stricter conditions for their registration and work and many other things.

On the other hand, Lukashenka's men in these years successfully struggled not only with political opponents but also with criminality. Unlike Russia, with her heinous criminal chaos of the 1990s, in Belarus criminal activity was reined in very quickly.

Working under the unscrupulous president, Sheiman helped to revive security agencies – police, special services and the military – severely battered and effectively paralysed after the dissolution of the Soviet Union. New administration restored to security

agencies a sense of being needed, valued and respected, as Lukashenka stopped campaigns revealing unpleasant pages in their history and gave them familiar tasks to carry out. At the same time, new persons from lower positions were brought to manage security organs.

In November 2000, Lukashenka moved Sheiman to the office of Prosecutor General, where he worked for the next four years. Those were the fat years of the regime which had alrady given up plans of conquering the Kremlin but still received generous Russian subsidies. In 2004-2006, Sheiman held another key office – Head of the Administration of the President – probably the most important power centre of the Belarusian regime.

Retirement Impossible

He then apparently left the political frontline and is said to have switched to conducting murky deals. In 2006, he was again appointed the secretary of the Security Council only to be sacked after being accused of negligence after the 2008 Independence Day bombing in Minsk.

Because of his frequent visits to the Third World, Sheiman is regularly accused of involvement in arms deals.

Yet Sheiman was too useful to be forgotten and in January 2009 he was appointed assistant to the President for Special Tasks. That was a very uncertain job – but it was not just honorary retirement. It was apparently an office for carrying out tasks too sensitive to be sorted out through normal government channels. The general's comeback as a head of the President's Property Administration confirms his unfading relevance.

Sheiman has sacrificed for Lukashenka much more than most others in the president's retinue. It is Sheiman whom the opposition accused of involvement in two of the three cases of disappearance of political opponents in 1999. Since 2004, he has been banned from travelling to the US and EU – one of the first Belarusian officials to land on the list. He was one of the very few who were not even temporarily removed from it at the time of the warming up in relations between Belarus and the EU.

Furthermore, Sheiman has worked for the Belarusian regime in developing countries since the mid-1990s, for example going to Sudan as early as 1996 or 1997. He has been a very important figure in Belarusian relations with Venezuela since the late 2000s.

Because of his frequent visits to the Third World, Sheiman is regularly accused of involvement in arms deals. A real scandal broke out around him in 2008 when the Spanish newspaper *El Pais* accused him of complicity in Venezuelan attempts to help Colombian guerrillas. The documents published, however, were too ambiguous to corroborate the charges and did not name Sheiman directly.

The Belarusian leader appreciates the faithfulness of his soldier. Lukashenka gave the Soviet-era major the highest military rank existing in Belarus: colonel general. Sheiman seems to enjoy such distinctions.

Recently he appeared publicly with an immense number of medals. Having a couple of real ones which he received in the Afghanistan war and from known special occasions (e.g. from the Venezuelan government), the general could have resisted adding to them dozens and dozens of doubtful decorations – affordable for everyone with some money.

Sheiman's career shows the new social mobility Lukashenka created to bring to the top people like himself. They are shrewd and not without talents but quite unscrupulous and sometimes narrow-minded. The general epitomises this group and to a certain extent the regime itself, alongside such regime officials as foreign minister Makey or head of the Presidential Administration Kabiakou.

On the other hand, many other top bureaucrats serve the regime, but, very likely, do not consider it as their own. Prime Minister Myasnikovich seems to represent this group.

Lukashenka needs them all. He is as opportunist in domestic policy as he is in foreign policy. He has never stuck to any political line and has never given all power to any single group, and Sheiman is an example of the uncertain fate of courtier-like Belarusian officials.

Presumably the powerful Sheiman had to accept a political setback and, of course, cannot be the grey eminence of the regime. Rather than being an independent politician, he is just one of the last soldiers remaining in Lukashenka's guard - a man to be deployed whenever and wherever necessary.

About the Author

Siarhei Bohdan is an analyst at the Centre for Transition Studies. An alumnus of the Belarus State University and European Humanities University in Lithuania, he is a regular contributor to Nasha Niva, a Belarusian independent weekly. As a fellow of Europäische Journalisten-Fellowships Siarhei is now doing a research project at Berlin's Humboldt University. He comes from Maladechna, Belarus.

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